



TAPPING THE POWER OF PLACE

The problems of rural schools are often invisible to the public and policymakers. The solutions may be found in the communities themselves.

BY TIM LOCKETTE

In Illinois, a parent reminds her child to “pretend you’re dead” to avoid being shot if gun violence breaks out in school.

In Wisconsin, parents band together to protest the closing of a local school, which they see as the core of their community.

In South Carolina’s poorest districts, dropout rates hover around 50 percent and teachers seem to come and go as if through a revolving door.

Do these sound like problems from the

decaying heart of a major city? Think again.

In American popular culture, the word “rural” invokes images of sunny farms and little red schoolhouses—while “urban” means drugs, poverty and crime. But those who know the reality of both worlds will tell you that rural schools face many of the same challenges as their urban counterparts.

“One of the biggest myths is that rural communities don’t have anything to worry about,” said Rachel Tompkins, a longtime

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN STAUFFER

rural education advocate and former director of the Rural School and Community Trust. “They’re supposed to be scenic places full of happy, self-sufficient people who tend gardens and live off the land.”

In reality, Tompkins says, some of America’s poorest children go to rural schools. Rural poverty is often hidden away in places where policymakers can’t see it—in houses far from a paved road, in the temporary quarters of migrant farmworkers, in a car that doubles as a home. Teachers see this poverty every day, and others in the community sometimes know about it. But even they often think of concentrated poverty as a big-city problem.

In the 800 poorest rural districts, the poverty rate mirrors the rate in major urban districts such as Chicago and Los Angeles, and those 800 districts alone serve more than 900,000 students.

“Another major myth is that we don’t need to worry about rural education because rural is going away,” Tompkins said.

It’s true that America’s population has become majority-urban. But the fact is that the rural student body is larger than ever—it just hasn’t boomed at the same rate as the urban and suburban populations. A full 19 percent of America’s students are in majority-rural districts. Many states—including economically struggling states like Mississippi—are still majority rural.

“In popular culture, rural communities are all [white] and none of them are diverse,” Tompkins says. “And all poor children of color, supposedly, live in the inner city.”

In reality, children of color make up 25 percent of the rural school population. They’re African Americans in the Alabama Black Belt, American Indian students on reservations in New Mexico, Latino students on the Texas border or the children of immigrants in North Carolina—and a thousand other groups in a thousand other situations.

This shifting—and diverse—population belies another myth about rural communities. “We think of rural communities as places where nothing ever changes, but that’s not quite right,” Tompkins said.

Rural America is often the place where economic shifts and public policy changes have their most obvious impact. One big box retailer, one line in the Farm Bill, one plant closing can change the landscape forever. It’s a place where the economic and environmental consequences of public policy are written in the landscape—if you know how to read the landscape.

A Formula for Scarcity

Rural residents may not even be aware of one of the biggest changes affecting their schools right now—a small altera-

tion in federal policy that has shifted Title I assistance away from rural districts.

In 2002, Congress funded a seemingly small change that weighted the Title I funding heavily in favor of large districts, says Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust.

“I’m sure this was done with good intentions,” Strange said. “But the result has been that rural communities have gotten a smaller piece of the Title I pie.”

Strange says no one begrudges funding to large, high-poverty districts like Chicago. But this policy shift has effectively transferred money from smaller districts to affluent communities like Gwinnett County, Georgia, and Fairfax County, Virginia. Strange says 10,800 rural Title I districts have lost out under the formula, as have mid-sized, struggling cities like Flint, Michigan.

“Part of the equation is to get students to start looking seriously at what it means to live in a rural place. They have questions about the world around them, and that’s a place to start teaching.”

“Because Title I funds come in one single disbursement, I have a feeling that a number of districts don’t even understand this formula has been decreasing their share of funding,” Strange said. “They’re adjusting to changes, but may not know the cause of the problem.”

Is Bigger Better?

For many districts, the answer to scarce funding is consolidation.

Combine several small schools into one large campus, the theory goes, and you can benefit from economies of scale. Administration will be cheaper; duplication will be eliminated. With a bigger teaching staff, you’ll be able to hire more specialists, provide a wider range of courses and support a healthy diversity of student clubs.

But many rural school advocates warn that the advantages of big schools, both financial and academic, may be an illusion.

“We’re rushing into consolidation, but we don’t really know what we’re doing,” said Leroy Johnson, director of Southern Echo, an organization that works to improve rural education in Mississippi through grassroots organizing.

Johnson and other rural education advocates say the financial costs of rural schools are often hidden. When school boards analyze the costs of running a consolidation, they

often don't factor in the cost of building the new school—just the yearly operating costs. With longer bus rides, fuel costs typically go up. And another spike in the price of gas could easily flip the numbers, turning a money-saving consolidation into a financial drain.

And longer bus rides have another down side—they waste students' time, and often prohibit them from participating in school activities.

Tompkins points to Pocahontas County, West Virginia, a county of roughly 10,000 residents, where all the schools are small.

"Some of these schools can barely field a marching band," Tompkins said. "But everyone is in band, or playing some sport, or both. There's accessibility, and there's participation."

Local Problems, Local Solutions

If rural schools aren't understood by the policymakers, where do we look for answers? Some rural advocates say the answers are right at our feet.

"I always tell people that we don't just have lived experiences, we have lived expertise," Johnson said. "We understand the problems better than anybody. We need to move from being the objects of power to being the architects of power."

To change both the policy and the pedagogy, they say, we need to recognize each rural community's vast potential.

"Part of the equation is to get students to start looking seriously at what it means to live in a rural place," Johnson said. "They have questions about the world around them, and that's a place to start teaching."

Johnson's organization, Southern Echo, uses the methods of grassroots community organizing to get rural residents active on the issues that matter to them—and to teach the basics of science and social studies. For instance, both of those disciplines are useful in a simple study of the local environment.

"Environmental justice is something that has real meaning in rural communities," Johnson said. "If your school is in the middle of a cotton field, you want to know what's being sprayed on it. If your diet consists largely of fish from Black Creek, you want to know what chemicals are in Black Creek."

The study of economics also plays a big role. Johnson recalls leading a group of elementary school students in an examination of property tax bills. They found that the tax assessor

seemed to be overvaluing African-American homes and undervaluing white-owned properties—and they got the county to do a reassessment.

Rural residents are often deeply ambivalent about local scandals. On the one hand, they want solutions to corruption. On the other hand, they're highly sensitive to news that "embarrasses" the community.

Rural education advocates say that's simply more evidence that rural America is not the sunny paradise of popular myth. On the other hand, they point out that there is great untapped energy and potential in rural areas. Success stories like Federal Hocking in Ohio (see p. 25) show what these schools can do.

"People need to get smart and realize they have power," Tompkins says. "They need to ask questions and take control." ♦

Grassroots Work in the Rural Classroom

"For the most part, rural schools are preparing students to leave the community," says rural education advocate Rachel Tompkins. "We don't draw on the power of the local community or the sense of place."

Leroy Johnson of Southern Echo has seen grassroots organizing principles work well in both the school and community. By sending your students out to investigate the local landscape—and the challenges facing the community—you can spark interest in content area material, and possibly ignite a fire for change. Here are a few topics students could investigate:

The Biology of Bus Rides Long bus rides are a common experience for students in rural schools. Is boarding a bus at sunrise really compatible with a child's biological clock? Students in a science classroom can look at their own school's conditions, compare them with scientific insights on biology and human performance, and come up with ways to make their schools better places to study.

Fixing the Formula Rural districts may have been shortchanged by recent changes in the Title I funding formula. The Rural School and Community Trust (www.ruraledu.org) offers an online tool to help local residents see how their district is affected. Students can ask themselves what level of funding is fair—and find ways to make their voices heard.

Environmental Justice Encourage students' questions about the world they see around them. Where are those truckloads of trees going? Why do we have a landfill to store other folks' garbage? Why are we warned not to eat the fish we catch? Looking into these local issues can lead to global lessons about how the environment affects us—and how we affect others living downstream.